“Wear Your Damn Mask!”: Effects of SEC Head College Football Coaches COVID-19 Public Service Announcements

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Communication - Media (College Sport)
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Health communication campaigns seek to diminish stigma and promote care with public service announcements (PSAs) frequently prominent (Corrigan, Powell, & Al-Khouja, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, government leaders and health officials distributed information to the public with PSAs. In the south where football is king, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) institutions utilized their head college football coaches with PSAs regarding COVID-19.

PSAs are non-commercial advertisements aimed to improve knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Martiniuk, Secco, Yake, & Speechley, 2010). PSAs inform or induce certain behaviors in specific audiences, generally for non-commercial profit using mass media-approaches (Bator & Cialdini, 2000). Celebrity spokespersons can help improve the persuasive impact of a message inasmuch as there is a match between the spokesperson and the issue being presented (Shead et al., 2011). Normally, celebrity spokespersons are well known, respected, and have a good public image (Newcomb, Mercurio, & Wollard, 2000). Toncar, Reid, and Anderson (2007) stated that messages delivered by celebrities provide higher degrees of appeal, attention, and message recall than those delivered from non-celebrities. Examples of effective PSAs include celebrity endorsements of anti-tobacco messages that have been shown to be effective in increasing intentions to quit smoking (Chapman & Leask, 2001; Seghers & Foland, 1998; Tsai et al., 2005) as well as celebrity spokespersons that targeted drinking and driving being effective in reducing the number of impaired drivers on the road (Dejong & Atkin, 1995; Dejong & Hingson, 1998; Dejong & Winsten, 1990).

The focus of this study analyzed the effects of SEC head college football coaches promoting COVID-19 PSAs including specific message, the communication channel, and their effects locally. The theory of persuasion communication specifically Heuristic-Systematic Model proposes persuasion follows from the mental responses to the message (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagley, 1989). Heuristic processing occurs whenever an individual relies on some short-cut decision-making rule to construct an attitude toward the persuasive advice with the benefits including the speed with which the decisions can be made and the relatively trivial demands on cognitive capacity (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagley, 1989).

Twelve of the fourteen SEC head college football coaches disseminated PSAs with the release date pinpointed. Various messages included (1) stay home, (2) wear masks, (3) wash your hands, (4) practice social distance, (5) support medical professionals, (6) donate to food banks, and (7) support local restaurants. Researchers analyzed the presence of new known COVID-19 cases two weeks before and after the targeted message date for each school's county (USAFacts, 2020). Results revealed that eleven of the twelve counties had elevated levels of COVID-19 cases after the PSA release date. Findings will include breakdown of government data regarding school and county.

This research aims to analyze the unique window of the effects of SEC head college football coaches’ PSAs regarding COVID-19. Despite the results of the present study being unfavorable in the immediate effect of PSAs with celebrity spokespersons, we believe the results are noteworthy on university usages of college head football coaches to communicate to their respective fan bases to support government and health regulations.